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Yucca hysterics ignore real issues

By Leric Goodman
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Thank you for printing Harry Reid's recent commentary on the fight of Nevada's politicians against storing nuclear waste in the ground at Yucca Mountain. Sen. Reid's essay recalls a great truth: Government and politics in Nevada, as in the rest of America, are now an exercise in spending public money in wild indignation about nothing of any substance, while ignoring actual, solvable problems in the real world.

Yes, it is possible that sometime in the next 100,000 years or so something could happen to nuclear material entombed in Yucca Mountain. Yes, some of the material might get loose or leak, and it is possible -- if people are not around to fix things -- that sometime in those 100,000 years that could, possibly, affect Las Vegas. But do these possibilities justify trips to Washington by our new governor? Do they justify all of the rhetoric of our local, state and federal politicians? To put this into perspective, let us survey a few similar situations:

In Utah, there is a tailings pile of radioactive materials which sits on the banks of the Colorado River. Radioactive materials are actually leaching into the river and are working their way downstream toward us. These radioactive materials will arrive. This is not some mere possibility. What is being done about this? Nothing. Our politicians -- the ones who are so eloquent in expressing their "concern" about Yucca Mountain -- are doing nothing at all about the existing actual threat of radioactive waste in our drinking water in the near future. They wax indignant over a hypothetical future threat 100,000 years hence while remaining silent and inactive over something which is certain to happen 10 or 20 years from now.

Speaking of actual threats to real people living now, we have chemical residues from plants that made the rocket fuel ammonium perchlorate actually flowing into the Las Vegas Wash upstream from where the water district has put both of our drinking water intakes. These residues are in our water supply now. We could block this flow by spending a trivial amount of money. Yet, our politicians -- the ones who are so vocal about the hypothetical threat of Yucca Mountain -- are doing nothing at all about this actual danger of chemical pollution in our drinking water.

And still speaking of actual threats to real people who are here right now, there is that little matter of having our treated waste water flow into our water supply upstream from our drinking water intake tubes. Our sewage contains chemicals, a number of which mimic estrogen when they get into human bodies. This accelerates the growth of breast cancers and can interfere with the normal development of children. We could move either our sewage outfalls or our water intakes. What are our politicians doing about this? They are talking about the hypothetical possible future threat from Yucca Mountain instead.

Government should be spending the public's money fixing real public problems -- or, failing to accomplish that, it ought to return the money to the public. Of course, that would mean that politicians would be held accountable for accomplishing the public's business. It is so much safer to talk about future hypothetical possibilities instead of taking action against real problems in the real world. Hence our politicians vigorously whip at Yucca Mountain.

Sometime in the next 100,000 years Yucca Mountain might become a threat to public safety. Right now and for the foreseeable future, however, other threats to public safety are much greater.

Perhaps the greatest threat to public safety is the rhetoric of our politicians, all of whom seem to have fled from their responsibility to deal with real problems, and, instead, fomented hysteria over Yucca Mountain as a means of distracting the public.

Leric Goodman writes from Las Vegas.